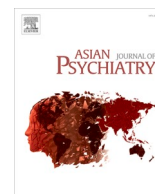




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Letter to the Editor

Covid-19: Cultural perspectives

The covid -19 pandemic is the seminal global event of the 21st century. In this brief communication we will review how our cultural orientations can influence the evaluation and response to this infection (Fouad, 2002). Culture is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2020) as “The customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a religious or social group.”

We are now several months into the pandemic. Information in the public domain has demonstrated that the responses to the pandemic have been very different in various jurisdictions. We suggest that cultural orientations are responsible for these variations (Guan et al., 2020; Heppner, 2008). In cultures that value individualism, people may form an independent approach, whereas cultures that value collectivism may form an interdependent approach (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Coping styles and strategies are also shaped by national culture. In multicultural societies individual responses may be influenced by individual cultural beliefs which can create dissonance within the dominant culture as in Canada and the United States (De Vaus et al., 2018).

Eastern–Western cultural differences in cognitive styles help to account for differences in responses (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2010). Eastern cultural groups, for example, Chinese, Japanese and South Asians are more likely to use holistic methods whereas Western cultural groups are more likely to respond in context specific ways, with an expectation to change the course of events. The latter may include the development of a vaccine as an optimal response. Also as covid-19 is forcing us to dwell in uncertainty with changing forecasts on a daily basis, Eastern cultures will argue that some things are beyond ones’ control, and practice acceptance which Western cultures would regard as unwelcome passivity.

A global event of such magnitude is also a threat to national security, economy, and social order and collective actions led by the governments are crucial in managing the crisis (Ji et al., 2004). Countries with a political culture of strong central authority (China, Russia, Singapore, North Korea) allow leaders to formulate strategies on behalf of their people while in Western cultures with democratically elected governments (USA, UK, Canada), decisions are participative with stakeholders from diverse backgrounds (House et al., 2004). The latter countries’ decision making can also be driven by populism with all its attendant inefficiencies (Ensari and Murphy, 2003).

It is our thesis that in dealing with covid-19, cultural factors can supersede specific political systems. Accordingly in “tight” cultures (Singapore, South Korea, China), governments tend to enforce strict behavioral constraints for the public (social distancing, wearing masks, tracking individual compliance) whereas in “loose” cultures this is not possible leading to viewing the virus as an affront to ones’ democratic rights and freedoms (Gelfand and Denison, 2020). In some Western countries, for example not wearing a mask is construed as a political statement to assert ideological affiliation. This pandemic calls for a more

cohesive approach borrowing the best ideas from various cultural orientations. Some countries (e.g., Singapore) may already be doing so.

A cohesive approach is also required in dealing with the impending mental health crisis. Although definitive information is lacking, rates of suicide, substance use disorders, domestic abuse, anxiety and depressive disorders are already reported to be increasing worldwide (Tandon, 2020).

In these times in which we now live we have also been called upon to deal with the deep social and racial fault lines exposed by covid -19 and George Floyd’s death. As well our universal economic well-being is severely compromised. It is clear that a return to “normal” is a fool’s dream. How we survive these treacherous times will be dependent on our individual and national capacities for resilience, this in part will be framed by our cultural foundations.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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